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ABSTRACT

Although institutions of higher education differ widely, little is known about the effects of different college characteristics on early career outcomes. A study was conducted to examine the relationships among nine college characteristics and job offers, employment status, job attitudes, and job performance of recent college graduates. College characteristics studied were ability of entering freshmen, selectivity, sex composition of student body, control, size, wealth, religiosity, religious affiliation, and reputation for quality. The sample consisted of accounting students and newly-hired accountants representing 93 colleges and universities. Subjects were surveyed during the beginning of their senior year in college, their first week at work, and after one year on the job. The results indicated that the college characteristics examined were generally not related to job attitudes and job performance. Characteristics of colleges did correlate strongly with receiving job offers from, and being employed at, prestigious firms. The results are discussed in terms of threshold effects, situational influences, and prestige effects. Implications for educational and recruiting practices are suggested. (Author/NB)

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Selective Recruiting: College Characteristics and Job Outcomes

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education differ widely. Yet little is known about the effects of different college characteristics on early career outcomes. We examine the relationships between nine college characteristics and job offers, employment status, job attitudes, and job performance of recent college graduates. The sample consists of accounting students and newly-hired accountants representing 93 college and universities. Subjects were surveyed during the beginning of their senior year in college, their first week at work, and after one year on the job. The results show that college characteristics are generally not related to job attitudes and job performance. On the other hand, characteristics of colleges strongly correlate with receiving job offers from and being employed at prestigious firms. The results are discussed in terms of threshold effects, situational influences, and prestige effects. Implications for educational and recruiting practices are suggested.

Over the last 50 years higher education has become an important--if not the most important--vehicle for gaining access to career opportunities and for career progress. The correlation between years of education and income is well established (Mincer, 1974), as is the relationship between years of education and occupational status (Jencks, 1979). Moreover, attending college and, in particular, earning a college degree account for most of the variance in the relationships between education and earnings and between education and occupational status (Jencks, 1979).

Although a college degree has become an indispensable springboard for many careers, the type of college an individual attends is also considered important. Many high school students, parents, and career counselors give careful consideration to the decision of what college to attend (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1986). This is an important decision because college aspirants assume that colleges differ in the quality of education they provide and the career advantages that accrue to students after graduation (Cookson & Persell, 1985). Similarly, college administrators point out how the unique features of their schools help to launch graduates into promising careers (e.g., Brewster, 1966). And many employers recruit at

colleges selectively. They assume that certain college characteristics relate to later job performance (Rynes & Boudreau, 1986).

Suprisingly, little research exists on the relationship between college characteristics and career outcomes. What research there is looks at the relationship between just one variable--college quality--and career outcomes (e.g., Howard, 1986). College quality is typically defined in terms of reputation or academic ability of entering freshmen (Astin, 1985). As Astin (1977, p. 209) comments:

> Information on the permanence of impacts of different types of colleges and college experiences is limited, primarily because such studies have ... used one measure of college characteristics (selectivity or quality). [emphasis in the original].

Yet there is a tremendous variety among institutions of higher learning--public and private, large and small, religious and secular, and selective and nonselective. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between college characteristics and early career outcomes. Specifically, we examine the relationships between college characteristics and job offers, employment status, and job performance and job attitudes. For ease of presentation, we use the word "college" to refer to both colleges and universities.

College Characteristics

College characteristcs can be grouped under two headings, input factors and context factors. Input factors are the characteristics of students entering a school. Context factors are characteristics of schools which socialize, educate, or in other ways "add value" to students. We consider three input factors and six context factors which theory and related research suggest should influence the early career outcomes of college graduates. The input factors are ability of entering freshmen, selectivity, and sex composition of the student body; the context factors are control, size, wealth, religiousity, religious affiliation, and reputation for quality.

Ability of entering freshmen. Colleges differ widely in the average level of cognitive ability of their entering freshman classes (Klitgaard, 1985, pp. 109-111). A considerable amount of research shows that cognitive ability correlates with college grades (Ford & Campos, 1977), job performance (Hunter, 1986), and career success (Jencks, 1979). Therefore, we expect that individuals who graudate from colleges where freshmen classes have a high, average level of cognitive ability should experience more favorable early career outcomes than individuals who graduate from schools where admission standards are lower. Employers may be more likely to recruit at and offer jobs to graduates from

colleges which admit a majority of bright students. Moreover, since cognitive ability remains fairly stable throughout college (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1970), graduates from colleges which admit students with high cognitive ability should also perform better on the job (e.g., Hunter, 1986).

Selectivity. We define "selectivity" as the percentage of applicants who are offered admission in a given year. Selectivity is an indication of the control a school has over the content of its student body. School selectivity may influence the outcomes of graduates for several reasons. First, selective universities have a wider variety of applicants from which to choose. This enables a university to select students who meet or exceed admission standards rather than admit whoever applies in order to fill classroom space. The more selective an institution is, the greater the likelihood that it can admit a high quality student body. Moreover, a selective college can engineer the composition of its classes to enhance those attributes it believes will improve students' educational experience (e.g., Thompson, 1986). For example, a school may wish to have entering classes with students of diverse geographical or cultural backgrounds. Winter, McClelland, and Stewart (1981, p. 147) suggest that diversity of college peers enhances personal maturity, disciplined assertion, and critical thinking

abilities. It may also help individuals deal effectively with diversity in the workplace--as in interacting with heterogeneous coworkers, superiors, and clients.

Sex composition. Although most colleges in the United States are coeducational, research suggests that the proportion of males or females in a college is correlated with the orientations and attitudes of students as well as with the general college climate (Astin, 1965). Schools with a higher proportion of males tend to have more realistic and conventional environments, while schools with a higher proportion of females have more social and artistic environments (Astin, 1965, p. 25). Therefore, students graduating from schools with a larger proportion of males should be more comfortable working in realistic or conventional occupations. Similarly, employers from conventional or realistic organizations might be inclined to recruit at or offer jobs to students from schools with similar orientations.

Control. Although not always a precise dichotomy, a central feature of college governance is whether a school is publically or privately controlled. Type of control has differential effects on students, and these effects should be related to early career outcomes. Students in private colleges have more interaction with professors, become more familiar with professors in their major field, and are more

verbally agressive than students in public institutions (Astin, 1977, p. 231). They also are more likely to have career aspirations to become business executives and obtain professional degrees (Astin, 1965, pp. 30, 95). On the other hand, students in public schools are more pragmatic and have greater leadership skills than students in private schools (Astin, 1965, p. 30). Since these findings suggest that both public and private control may influence early career outcomes, we will not offer a specific hypothesis on control, but will include it on an exploratory basis.

Size. The size of a college (as measured by the number of students enrolled) is one of its most visible characteristics. A primary effect of size on students' educational experience is the degree of attention they receive from faculty. The smaller the school, the more faculty attention students receive (Green and others, 1983); and individualized attention results in greater learning (Bloom, 1985). In addition, students from smaller schools have more opportunity to exercise leadership roles--thereby gaining practice, familiarity, and comfort in such roles (Astin, 1977). Since it is reasonable to assume that student-faculty interaction and intensive learning affect an individual's ability to perform effectively outside of the

classroom, students who graduate from smaller schools should have more favorable early career outcomes than students who graduate from larger schools.

Wealth. For our purposes, the wealth of a college is the amount of financial resources actually directed towards the education of students, that is, the amount of financial resources spent per student per year. Wealth should be positively related to career outcomes for several reasons. It is critical to a university's ability to hire good faculty, and universities with top reputations have among the highest paid faculty (Astin, 1985). Financial resources allow a university to hire more faculty per student, which translates into more individualized instruction. University wealth is associated with well-stocked libraries, instructional materials, scientific facilities, and cultural resources and programs. And wealthy colleges attract the most able students, as measured by college entrance exam scores (Astin, 1985, p. 40).

Religiousity and religious affiliation. Religiousity is defined as whether or not a college is affiliated with a religious denomination. Religious affiliation relates to the particular denomination with which a school is affiliated. Religious denominations have played an important role in the history of higher education in the United States (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976), and 24% of all colleges in the U.S. (794) are

currently affiliated with religious denominations (Grant & Snyder, 1986). As with control, the evidence is mixed on the effects of religiousity and religious affiliation on college graduates (Astin, 1977). Therefore, no specific hypotheses are offered on the effects of these variables on early career outcomes.

Reputation for quality. Many colleges have well known reputations for quality, and the reputations of colleges are quite stable over time (Jones, Lindzey, & Coggeshall, 1982; Roose & Anderson, 1970). There are several reasons why we expect that the reputation of a college should influence early career outcomes. Colleges with excellent reputations may raise students' self-esteem and occupational aspirations by inculcating in students the belief that they are "special" (Winter et al., 1981). Policies and rituals of top schools infuse students with a sense that they are elite, society's future leaders (Kamens, 1977). Individuals who are treated as if they are special perform better than those who are not treated in that manner (Eden & Shani, 1982; Rosenthan & Jacobson, 1968). Graduates of top schools may also benefit from a "signaling" effect or labeling (Spence, 1973). A degree from a prestigious college may label an individual as talented. As a result, employers may be more inclined to hire students from prestigious schools. Having higher expectations of graduates from such schools, they may give

them more challenging assignments (Klitgaard, 1985), which in turn should influence job performance (Berlew & Hall, 1966).

Method

Subjects

This study used longitudinal data from two samples. Sample One consisted of 1,424 individuals who were seniors in accounting programs when their participation in the study began! They were accounting majors from 18 universities located primarily in the southwest. Sample Two consisted of 468 individuals who were newly hired accountants when their participation in the study began. Subjects in Sample Two were from 11 "Big Eight" accounting firm offices. Each of the Big Eight firms was represented. The Big Eight are considered among the most prestigious accounting firms in the country. All offices were located in the Southwest United States. Ninety-two (92) individuals from Sample One were also in Sample 2.

Because this study focuses on the effects of undergraduate institutions, only subjects from Sample Two who did not attend graduate school were included in the present analyses. By eliminating 108 subjects who attended graduate school, the final number included in Sample Two was 360, leaving a total of 1,692 subjects available for

analyses. Subjects in the two samples represent 93 colleges and universities. The characteristics of the subjects are summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

In the Fall of 1982, Questionnaire One was administered to subjects in Sample One at their universities. Questionnaire Two was administered in the Summer of 1983 to subjects in Sample Two on their first day at work; it was administered to subjects in group sessions by one of the authors. Questionnaires One and Two were similar. They contained a variety of items and scales relating to college affiliation, career plans, and job expectations.

Several months later Questionnaire Three was mailed to the subjects in Sample One who were not in Sample Two. This questionnaire, mailed to subjects' homes, queried subjects about their current employment situation and career goals. Subjects were requested to mail their completed questionnaire to a university address. Questionnaires were received from 611 of the 1,332 subjects who received Questionnaire Three (46% response).

Subjects in Sample Two received Questionnaire Four in the summer of 1984, after they had been employed for one year. This questionnaire, mailed to subjects' offices, included items about job attitudes. Subjects were requested to mail their completed questionnaires to a university address, and were assured that individual responses would be confidential and anonymous. Questionnaires were received from 280 subjects (60% response).

At the same time, a performance measurement questionnaire and cover letter were mailed to each subject's supervisor (84% response). It requested first year performance ratings (as per personnel file), and asked additional questions on performance, promotability, and turnover. Again, confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and supervisors were asked to mail their completed questionnaires to a university address.

Measures

College characteristics. Subjects were asked to indicate the name of their undergraduate institution on Questionnaires One and Two, as well as college major and degree received. Information on characteristics of colleges and universities was obtained from the 12th edition of American Universities and Colleges (American Council on Education, 1983), a standard reference work on attributes of American institutions of higher learning. In general, the

information for this edition was for the 1980-81 academic year, the year when most subjects in the study were sophomores in college. Information was gathered for every American college or university represented by subjects in Samples One and Two.

The academic ability of entering freshmen was estimated from the average total Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores or the average composite American College Test (ACT) scores of entering freshmen for each institution. Because most schools require SAT or ACT scores, a single index of academic ability was constructed using the following procedure. First, SAT total and ACT composite scores were equated using data from Langston and Watkins (1980). Second, the ranges were ranked into ten categories. A score of 1 corresponded to SAT total scores of 699 or below and ACT composite scores of 14 or below; the scores increased to 10, which corresponded to SAT total scores of 1,200 or above or ACT scores of 29 and above. College selectivity was measured by the percentage of applicants who were admitted for the 1979 academic year. This figure was subtracted from 100 so that higher selectivity would be associated with a higher number. Sex composition was indexed by the percentage of males enrolled.

Institutional control was categorized as public (coded 1) or private governance (coded 2). Size was indexed by the total number of students enrolled during the academic year. School wealth was measured by the ratio of the annual operating budget to the number of students enrolled. Religiosity was coded as religious (2) or secular (1). If schools had a religious affiliation, it was coded as Protestant (1) or Catholic (2). Ratings from the Gourman Report (Gourman, 1985) were used as a measure of reputation for quality. The Gourman Report rates the overall quality of over 1,000 American and international colleges and universities (using a 5-point scale). The rating is based on a variety of factors deemed important to college quality (e.g., quality of instructional staff and institutional leadership, character of the instructional program, staff morale). The correlations among college characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Job offers and employment status. On Questionnaire Two, subjects were asked to indicate the job offers they received from a list of 22 accounting firms and oil companies

which were large employers of accounting graduates in the Southwest. On Questionnaire Three, subjects were asked to indicate if they received a job offer from a Big Eight firm and the type of organization where they were currently employed. Employing organizations were grouped into three categories: Big Eight accounting firm; non-Big Eight accounting firm, and private sector non-accounting organizations.

Performance and promotability. Job performance was measured by a composite of subjects' annual performance rating and the two following questions on the performance questionnaire sent to supervisors: "Would you rehire this person to work for you if he or she were to quit?" (anchored from 1, "definately not" to 5, "definately yes"), and "In general, how easy would it be to find someone who would do as good a job as this person is doing (anchored from 1 "very easy" to 5 "very difficult"). The coefficent alpha for the three measures was .78. Promotability was measured by a single item: "How promotable is this person?", anchored from 1 ("definitely not promotable") to 5 ("has recently been promoted").

Job attitudes and motivation. Two job attitudes were included in this study, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. All job attitude measures were included on Questionnaire Four. Job satisfaction was assessed by a

five-item scale included in the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS; Hackman & Oldham, 1977) (alpha = .77). Organizational commitment was measured by the Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian (1974) scale (alpha = .88). Internal work motivation was assessed by a six-item scale on the JDS which was included in Questionnaire Four (alpha = .67).

Results

The correlations between college characteristics and job outcomes are presented in Table 3. The college characteristics of religious affiliation and school quality correlated significantly with total number of job offers. There were significant correlations between the following college characteristics and receiving a

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Insert Table 3 about here

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job offer from a Big Eight firm: ability of entering freshmen, selectivity, sex composition, control, wealth, religiousity, religious affiliation, and school quality. As the correlations in Table 4 also show, most of the relationships between college characteristics and job attitudes and job performance were not significant. Academic ability of entering freshmen was negatively correlated with promotability and job performance. School quality correlated positively with promotability.

Table 4 presents the mean values of school characteristics by current employment status. Scheffé comparisons revealed that students were more

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Insert Table 4 About Here

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likely to be employed at a Big Eight than a non-Big Eight firm or industry if they graduated from schools which admit freshmen of higher academic ability, are more selective, wealthy, and which have higher reputations for quality. Subjects were more likely to be employed in a Big Eight firm than industry if they graduated from schools which have a higher percentage of male students, are privately controlled, and have a religious orientation.

Discussion

This research examined whether college characteristics are related to the early career outcomes --in particular, to job offers, employment status, and job attitudes and performance. Few significant relationships emerge between college characteristics and job attitudes and performance. However, there are strong relationships between college characteristics and both type of job offer and employment status. It is important to emphasize that the results of this do not speak to the relationship between college characteristics and the quality of education or college life.

That college characteristics are almost totally unrelated to job performance one year after graduation is a suprising--and significant--finding. We offer two explanations. First, once individuals meet some educational or cognitive threshold for an occupation, they have the necessary abilities to perform successfully (Jensen, 1986). It is likely that most of the subjects in our sample met the minimum ability threshold for the accounting profession. Many accounting firms--and all Big Eight firms--have rigorous hiring standards. Moreover, since there is a fair degree of consensus in the accounting field on the competencies for a bachlor's degree in accounting, a certain level of knowledge can be expected from accounting graduates. Second, when there is relatively little variation in basic competencies of employees, situational factors should have the strongest influence on job performance. For example, the expectations of one's supervisor (Eden & Shani, 1982), the amount of performance feedback received (Latham & Wexley, 1981), and an employee's general working environment (Oldham, Hackman, & Pearce, 1976) should have a stronger influence of job performance than where one went to college.

Why, then, did our results show such a strong relation between college characteristics and receiving a job offer from and being employed at prestigious, Big Eight accounting

firms? One explanation is that recruiters were unaware that college characteristics have little influence on job outcomes, and therefore made job offers on the basis of their, apparently, erroneous beliefs. Another is that hiring people from certain types of schools helps maintain a firm's image. Accounting firms, and other similar service organizations, have equivocal task-related standards of performance. Nevertheless, such organizations must maintain a high degree of public confidence. Effective use of symbols to communicate their trustworthiness helps maintain this image. One symbol is the educational pedigree of the individuals hired by the organization (Collins, 1979). Having employees from prestigious schools may serve as a signal of employee and organizational competence (Klitgaard, 1985, pp. 118-119). Educational credentials may be especially important for the organization's leaders who are the most visible to the external world. In addition, individuals from prestigious schools may be instrumental for developing and maintaining "contacts" with potential clients. Individuals with elite educational credentials are disproportionally represented both as partners of professional firms and as directors of large corporations (Cookson & Persell, 1985, pp. 195-201). Thus, the educational credentials of new-hires may have long term benefits to an organization's financial health, while having

little impact on short term task performance. It is also possible that, if the organization's leaders come from particular types of schools, they simply feel more comfortable hiring and working with individuals of similar background. Finally, people need to believe that they can predict and control life's events, even if they in fact have little control (Heider, 1958). To provide a sense of control, organizations may attend to areas which they can control (e.g., where to recruit and the type of applicants to hire), even if such activities have little payoff in productivity or job attitudes.

Implications

It is important to emphasize that the nature of the sample may limit the degree to which one can generalize from these results. It does seem reasonable, however, that the results of this study should generalize to other technical professions--especially those where credentialing occurs at the bachlor's level (e.g., engineering, computer science). In addition, this study focuses on early career outcomes. Different results may have been found for mid-career or late-career outcomes. On the other hand, the nature of this sample is a major advantage for generalizing to the population of young accountants. A good deal of confidence can be placed in these results because of the large number of colleges represented and because the sample was not affected

by extraneous factors associated with multiple college majors, jobs, and types of organizations.

These findings support conventional beliefs about the differential value of college types: all of the characteristics, except size, helped in opening doors to prestigious firms. On the other hand, where one goes to school is unrelated to performance on the job. This suggests that career counselors can be fairly confident in suggesting to students that job conditions and job skills--and not where they went to college--will have the biggest impact on their job performance.

These results suggest that organizations can find capable employees in any type of college. Therefore, they may want to design their recruiting programs on the basis of logistical advantages and the efficiency of college placement offices, rather than on the type of college per se. In addition, by expanding recruiting efforts to a wider variety of colleges, organizations can increase their applicant pools--which will improve the utility of selection programs.

Finally, this study adds useful evidence to the debate over "value-added" assessment of higher education (Cicarelli, 1987). Our findings suggest that different types of colleges add the same value to students' reservoirs of job-specific information and skills. Broad skills and the quality of the

educational experience itself may be more appropriate criteria than specific occupational skills (or achievements) for assessing the value of college characteristics.

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Author Notes

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Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	Subjects used in present study* N = 1,692	Sample 1 Surveyed at College N = 1,424	Sample 2 Surveyed at Accounting Firms N = 468	Subjects in Sample 1 who were not in Sample 2 N = 1,332
Sex				
Male	48%	47%	59%	46%
Female	52	53	41	54
Age				
20-24	75	72	81	71
25-30	16	17	17	18
Over 30	9	11	2	11
Race				
White	92	92	95	92
Black	3	2	3	2
Hispanic	3	3	1	3
Asian	2	2	1	2
Other	0	0	0	0
Undergraduate Major				
Accounting	94	96	77	96
Other Business	4	4	13	4
Humanities/Social Science	1	0	4	0
Science Engineering	1	0	6	0

* These are subjects from Samples 1 and 2 who did not attend graduate school. Some total percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Table 2

Correlations Among College Characteristics

College Characteristics	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Ability of Entering Freshmen								
2. Selectivity	83							
3. Sex Composition[a]	83	74						
4. Control[b]	60	49	31					
5. Size	16	-06	07	59				
6. Wealth	90	82	73	37	13			
7. Religiousity[c]	58	47	30	--	-57	33		
8. Religious Affiliation[d]	88	93	95	--	37	90	--	
9. School Quality	85	64	61	14	54	74	13	77

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .05$ or $p < .01$.

[a] Percent male.

[b] 1 = Public, 2 = Private.

[c] 1 = Secular, 2 = Religious.

[d] 1 = Protestant, 2 = Catholic.

Table 3

Correlations Between College Characteristics and Job Outcomes

Characteristics	Job Offers		Motivation	Job Attitudes		Performance	
	Total Number of Job Offers[a]	Job Offer by "Big Eight" Firm[b]	Internal Work Motivation	Job Satisfaction	Organizational Commitment	Promotability	Job Performance
Input Factors							
Ability of Entering Freshmen	-01	34**	-03	07	02	-19*	-17*
Selectivity	00	31**	06	08	06	-03	11
Sex Composition	08	31**	-01	02	04	02	06
Context Factors							
Control	-05	23**	-01	00	-02	-05	00
Size	06	-05	-01	-03	07	04	00
Wealth	02	30**	-03	05	03	-04	03
Religiousity	00	23**	04	-02	00	-05	-03
Religious Affiliation	23*	36**	04	04	10	02	-13
School Quality	11*	29**	01	05	10	11*	09

Note: Decimals are omitted.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

[a] The total number of job offers received by subjects in Sample 2.

[b] These correlations are based on responses by subjects in Sample 1 who were not in Sample 2. 1 = no offer from a "Big Eight" firm, 2 = an offer from a "Big Eight" firm.

Table 4

Mean College Characteristics by Current Employment Status

College Characteristics	"Big Eight" Accounting Firm	Other Accounting Firm	Industry
Input Factors			
Ability of Entering Freshmen	7.77	6.60*	6.69*
Selectivity	29.13	23.03*	22.03*
Sex Composition[a]	56.92	56.17	54.71*
Content Factors			
Control[b]	1.35	1.23	1.21*
Size[c]	21.81	19.64	21.92
Wealth[c]	6.61	5.64*	5.59*
Religiousity[d]	1.32	1.23	1.21*
Religious Affiliation[e]	1.39	1.48	1.30
School Quality	3.98	3.72*	3.76*

* Significantly different from "Big Eight" Accounting Firm at $p < .05$.

[a] Percent male.

[b] 1 = Public, 2 = Private.

[c] In thousands.

[d] 1 = Secular, 2 = Religious.

[e] 1 = Protestant, 2 = Catholic.